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Review of Soviet Internal Affairs April-June 1981 (U)

Summary

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The Polish crisis continued to produce ripples on the normally placid surface of Soviet political life during the past three months. The failure of the Kremlin's remedies to redress the deteriorating situation in Warsaw apparently has created uncertainty in the Politburo and led to a decision not to convene a routine Central Committee plenum in late June. As yet, there is no solid evidence that the Politburo is split over Poland, as it was over Czechoslovakia in 1968. The leadership, however, has displayed signs of tension over how best to deal with its domestic problems in light of Polish developments. [REDACTED]

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With the Polish problem becoming more acute and US-Soviet relations stalemated, Soviet ideologues have cranked up a campaign to increase vigilance and tighten internal security. Meanwhile, elements within the party are playing on Russian nationalism and chauvinism, and Moscow is signaling its intention to match US military programs regardless of the cost. Yet, while the general line has become more "conservative," some important Politburo leaders continue to appeal for greater official responsiveness to public opinion and increased attention to consumer needs. [REDACTED]

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Under such conditions of stress even minor differences in approach can develop into full-blown policy debates. Over the years the Brezhnev leadership has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for continuity. Policy changes and personnel turnover have occurred at a glacial pace. But the Polish crisis potentially poses such a fundamental threat to Soviet power that "life itself," as the Soviets say, may force the aged Soviet leaders to adjust their old policies to new political realities in the difficult months ahead. In such an environment, new political alignments may well emerge in Moscow. [REDACTED]

This review is one of a series. It is based on information and analysis available through 2 July 1981. The contributions are uncoordinated, representing the views of the analysts named at the end of each section. Comments are welcome and may be addressed to the [REDACTED]

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Review of Soviet Internal Affairs April-June 1981 [REDACTED]

I. Domestic Politics

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A Turn to the Right

Not surprisingly, the dominant theme of Soviet propaganda during this period has been the need to batten the hatches at home. In an effort to prevent the erosion of internal discipline, the regime has launched a frontal assault on "antisocial" attitudes, imposed further quarantine measures to limit the population's exposure to foreign influences, tightened emigration procedures, and arrested all but a handful of the few remaining dissidents. [REDACTED]

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This rear-guard action has featured a major conference of ideologists at which Party Secretary Suslov denounced "alien" ideologies and called for the "strictest control" over labor; the meeting was followed by similar conferences in the national republics. Further, Brezhnev attended a KGB conference that received prominent play in the media, while a spate of articles by high-level KGB officials, ideological watchdogs, and party spokesmen in the republics warned against the dangers of "bourgeois nationalism," religious "vestiges of the past," and "nihilistic" behavior on the part of young people. [REDACTED]

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A move to associate the regime even more closely than before with Russian nationalism underpins these repressive measures. One manifestation of the tilt toward Russian nationalism was the call—advanced tentatively by Brezhnev at the 26th Party Congress in February but given a more pointed formulation by Suslov in April—for protecting the rights of "minorities" (in this context, Russians) in non-Russian areas. Other indications were attacks on "cosmopolitans" in the Writers' Union and heightened emphasis on programs to promote Russian language usage in the non-Russian republics. [REDACTED]

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As during other periods of international tension, the regime's appeal to Russian national sentiment appears intended to mobilize the core of the population in support of a hardline policy toward the United States and, implicitly, for the material sacrifices this policy requires. Examples of this effort were the statements in June of Defense Minister Ustinov and his deputy Kulikov on the anniversary of Nazi Germany's invasion of the USSR, comparing the contemporary struggle against US "imperialism" with the historic struggle against Hitler. In this context, recent moves to refurbish Stalin's image take on a special political resonance. [REDACTED]

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But the current emphasis on nationalist themes goes beyond the glorification of Russian history and culture to the advocacy of economic and demographic policies favoring Russian interests at the expense of some of the outlying republics. Regime spokesmen have recently assigned an even higher priority than in the past to increasing investment in the Russian republic's non-black-earth zone, as well as urging the accelerated development of a number of Siberian economic projects. Several leaders now are backing an approach to the Soviet Union's manpower problems that entails large-scale migration of workers from labor-rich Central Asia to labor-scarce Russian areas targeted for rapid development. This approach runs counter to the practice of recent years, when the regime in effect opted to build new industry in the Central Asian republics rather than attempting to lure Moslem workers to jobs in older and culturally alien industrial areas in the Soviet heartland. [REDACTED]

Division Within the Leadership?

Although the general direction of policy has been toward raising the level of coercion in Soviet society and renewing appeals to Russian national interests, some leaders—notably Suslov and evidently his Secretariat colleague Kirilenko—have endorsed this approach with particular vigor. Other leaders—including Brezhnev, Party Secretary Chernenko, and Georgian party boss Shevardnadze—have cushioned calls for vigilance with a solicitous attitude toward popular grievances, advocacy of an increase in intraparty “democracy,” and emphasis on the need to placate consumer interests. Many of the proposals that one or another has advanced, such as to expand the role of trade unions, are lacking in specificity and may be largely cosmetic gestures. In addition, some steps that have been taken, such as the creation of commissions to study public opinion and the campaign to pay greater attention to letters from citizens, may complement rather than contradict steps to strengthen control mechanisms. Nevertheless, even measures that have been advanced as tactical concessions to societal pressures for change could constitute the nucleus of a program from which more significant proposals for institutional reform might emerge. [REDACTED]

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Moreover, public discussion of one issue—that of resource allocation priorities—reveals a diversity of views among Soviet leaders that suggests the existence of important policy differences. While Brezhnev and Chernenko have treated the consumer sector as the central focus of economic policy, other leaders have given it only nominal support. Suslov, in particular, has soft-pedaled Brezhnev's “food program,” derided “petit-bourgeois, consumerist” elements, and fallen back on the time-honored argument that production of consumer goods can best be increased by drawing on local “reserves.” [REDACTED]

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The Polish situation has created new strains on Soviet resources, both because the weakened Polish economy requires propping up and because the Soviet military probably is pushing for accelerated defense spending to compensate for the perceived unreliability of Poland as a Warsaw Pact ally. As the competition for shrinking resources intensifies between different regions and sectors of the Soviet economy, frictions within the leadership may also increase [REDACTED]

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Under these circumstances, it is possible that one or another contender for the succession will ally himself with regional leaders resisting increased investment in the RSFSR. By our reading, Chernenko would appear to be the most likely candidate for this role. Unlike Suslov, he has not revealed a strong pro-Russian bias in his statements on nationality policy. Unlike the more "junior" leaders, Romanov, Dolgikh, and Solomentsev, he has had no career identification with RSFSR interests. Unlike Kirilenko, he lacks a strong regional base of support within the party and is presumably eager to build one. Moreover, Chernenko's advocacy of consumer interests and of greater responsiveness to popular demands probably strikes a responsive chord among a number of leaders in the Central Asian and Caucasian republics, some of whom—including the Georgian Shevardnadze, Kirgiz party chief Usubaliyev, and Azerbaydzhan leader Aliyev—seem to have gone out of their way to boost Chernenko's image. [REDACTED]

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Such regional leaders, concerned primarily with local problems rather than Soviet global strategy, may also be receptive to foreign policy initiatives that offer the prospect of reducing international tension, thus enabling the country to devote greater attention and resources to urgent domestic needs. In this connection, the relative moderation of Chernenko's recent public statements concerning policy toward Afghanistan and the United States, as well as his unorthodox repudiation of the notion that nuclear war is a "rational, almost 'legitimate' continuation of politics," suggests the possibility of his trying to capitalize on such sentiments. [REDACTED]

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It is not clear whether differing leadership approaches to domestic problems reflect policy differences over Poland. The Politburo's decision not to hold a plenum before the Supreme Soviet met in late June suggests that the Politburo is uncertain how to proceed in Poland. [REDACTED] al Central Committee members had an opportunity to comment in draft on the Soviet letter sent to the Polish Central Committee in early June. Such an irregular action as the Politburo's circulating the letter for Central Committee comment would itself imply uncertainty. If this was the case, it is conceivable that adverse reactions from members of the Central Committee impelled the Politburo to back off from holding a plenum. It is not credible

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however, that any significant number of Central Committee members would criticize Politburo policy unless it became known that one or more Politburo members themselves dissented from that policy. [REDACTED]

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II. Economic Affairs

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As a result of its military commitment in Afghanistan, the potential for another in Poland, and an increase in US military spending, the Soviet leadership is reportedly revising its 1981-85 plan to accommodate large increases in defense allocations. Such increases can only come at the expense of Soviet consumers. [REDACTED]

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The domestic economy is continuing to falter this year. So far, industry has failed to recover from last year's poor performance, and cold, wet-weather this spring has already put the goal of a 236-million-ton grain crop virtually beyond reach. With food shortages continuing, the potential for scattered incidents of unrest remains high. Although major civil strife (as in Poland) is unlikely, continued stringencies will almost certainly negate the current effort of the Soviet regime to raise labor productivity. [REDACTED]

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